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ABSTRACT

Eight fifth grade students participated in a study that investigated the effects of test context on test performance and subjects' perceptions of tests in varying contexts. In the first three contexts, reading of words in isolation was tested using materials drawn from three different informal reading inventories equivalent in difficulty level. The words were printed on cards and shown to each child. In context one, there were no prompts; in context two, the child was able to listen to his or her reading of the words and choose the ones thought correct; in context three, the child read another set of words, and was prompted for those not identified. In the remaining three contexts, oral reading of connected discourse was tested using materials compiled from informal reading inventory passages. Context four used comprehension question prompts; context five allowed subjects to scan the passages before reading; and context six used another set of passages and involved discussion of the passage topics before reading. Results showed that for most of the subjects, freedom to ask questions and to receive prompts increased the range of their performance markedly. In addition, six of the subjects thought they had done well in context one, while none though he or she had done well in contexts two or three. Three thought they had performed well in context four, and all subjects perceived themselves to have performed poorly in contexts five and six. The results provide support for dynamic assessment contexts that invite subjects to use language in more natural ways than traditional test situations allow. (A copy of a test protocol is appended.) (FL)

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An Examination of Contexts for Reading Assessment

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Conventional practice in testing holds to the belief that limiting, if not eliminating, contextual influence is a desirable prerequisite for the ideal testing situation. Such is the view articulated by Fuchs and Fuchs (1986): "scientism appears to govern the way we administer tests as well as our understanding of what occurs during testing" (p. 243). They cite evidence for such a claim in the recently published Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (AERA, American Psychological Association, and NCME, 1985) in which testing is likened to formal experimentation. "This perspective encourages the examiner (i.e., unbiased investigator) to administer the test according to explicit non-varying instructions (i.e., experimental treatment) in a controlled setting (i.e., the laboratory)" (p. 243).

Such a statement endorses the perpetuation of the view that testing and teaching/learning situations are discreet entities. It leaves unchallenged the conventional examiner-examinee relationship as static, undirectional and predictable, reflected not only in the testing agenda, but also in the active control over the agenda. Further, this tradition places the examinee in a limiting language situation faced with a genre and circumstances which in any other life experience would be regarded as foreign, if not hostile.

It is only recently that any challenges have been made to the powerful influence of positivism on testing. Part of the challenge comes from the obvious disparity felt by teachers between their convictions about the best approaches to promote pupil learning and approaches which seem requisite for success on tests (Mayher & Brause, 1986). In addition, there is a growing body of research which challenges other basic assumptions underlying traditional testing. These studies suggest that test

performance may be influenced by examiners' personality (Feldman & Sullivan, 1971); examiners' attitudes about the legitimacy of testing (Horne & Garty, 1981); and choice of test location (Labov, 1973; Stoneman & Gibson, 1978). There is evidence, further, that examiner-examinee familiarity influences test performance, and particularly so for low SES children (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1986; Fuchs, Fuchs, Power, & Dailey, 1985). In addition, research suggests that test performance can be influenced by examinees' interpretation of the purpose of tests and their comprehension of test instructions (Abramyan, 1977; Deyhle, 1983; Mehan, 1978). What is particularly relevant to this study are the findings which suggest that test performance appears to be influenced by the nature of the test and the test situation (Cioffi & Carney, 1983; Feuerstein, 1979; Labov, 1973); and particularly, the evidence which points to the need for examiners and examinees to participate in dynamic, bi-directional and idiosyncratic relationships, frequently resulting in unexpected behavior (Cioffi & Carney, 1983; Feuerstein, 1979; Fuchs, Zern, & Fuchs, 1983; Roth, 1984).

A significant challenge to the validity in testing comes from the realization that reading ability cannot be defined independent of the context in which reading is used. The transaction between reader and text during the reading process is dependent on such factors as the reader's interest in material being read, his or her purposes for reading it, and his or her background experience relevant to the text. Of particular importance to reading during a testing situation is the chance element involved in accessing relevant background experience, especially under the pressure of the test context. Mayher and Brause (1986) suggest that such contextual variables are even more important for young and inexperienced readers than they are for skilled adults.

A consideration of the complexity of the reader/context interaction raises serious questions about traditional views of external validity. It suggests a need to look closely at internal validity (Johnston, 1986). This view is consonant with dynamic assessment methods which advocate inferences about children's learning based on improvement in learning observed during teacher/child (examiner/examinee) interaction (Budoff, 1974; Cioffi & Carney, 1983; Feuerstein, 1979). Such improvement can be conceptualized in terms of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). The zone has been described by Vygotsky as:

> the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

A plausible interpretation of the zone of proximal development in reading assessment relates to the extent to which a given strategy is used independently, or with varying degrees of instructional assistance. Vygotsky believed that this difference between independent and assisted activity was important in that it defines mental operations which have not matured, but are in the process of maturing. Brown and Reeve (1985) corroborate this view when they suggest that any estimate of developmental status must depend critically on the environment in which it is revealed including social environments in which parents, teachers, peers and experimenters provide degrees of contextual support for learning, sometimes without conscious attempt to do so. Such contexts, in their view, create development which in turn determines the level of learning "for which a child is ripe."

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of varying contexts in which processes of change could be observed as children

navigated within their "bandwidths of competence" with and without "other regulation". In addition, the study aimed to determine children's perceptions of assessment in these varied contexts.

SAMPLE

The sample for the study consisted of 8 fifth grade children (six boys and two girls) selected from two classrooms. These children were judged by their teachers to be the lowest readers in the class. Comprehension scores on the Canadian Gates McGinitie Reading Test (Level D) ranged between grades 3.1 and 3.9.

METHOD

A brief description of the assessment contexts follows. Contexts one to three comprised the assessment scenarios for three separate sessions in which reading words in isolation was assessed. The materials used for the assessment were word lists from three different informal reading inventories judged to be equivalent in difficulty level. All words were printed on 3 by 7 cards. Context one consisted of a typical "reading words in isolation" assessment session. Every attempt was made to put the child at ease during the session, but no prompts of any kind were given. Context two consisted of reading the word lists followed by an opportunity for the child to listen to a taped version of his/her reading, and to check off the words in the list judged to have been read correctly. The children were encouraged to try the words missed on the initial trial. In addition, they were encouraged to ask any questions related to these words, except for the question "What is this word?" Since this procedure was assumed to be relatively foreign to the children, a number of questions were modeled.

For example, "Say, I don't know the word alligator. I might ask you, 'Do the first three letters make the word all?'" Or "Does the 'g' in the word have the same sound as the 'g' in girl?"

Context three comprised the reading of another set of words, this time with prompts for any words not identified independently. These prompts involved cueing on sounds of specific words, e.g. "That word starts the same as the word gin." A very frequent prompt was that of progressively exposing a word, syllable by syllable, in order to highlight (visually only) the parts of polysyllabic words, as in false/hood, ob/ser/ving, gen/er/o/si/ty, etc. This was done by sliding a blank card across the word card from left to right.

Sessions for contexts one to three were conducted on three consecutive days, contexts assigned randomly for each day's session.

Contexts four to six comprised the assessment scenarios for another three sessions, this time for the purpose of assessing oral reading of connected discourse. Three sets of oral reading passages were compiled from published informal reading inventories. Minor revisions were made to render the passages roughly equivalent. However, no attempt was made to justify equivalence on the basis of complex text analyses.

Context four consisted of standard administration of IRI oral reading passage. Wh-probes were used as the basis for comprehension assessment. Context five comprised another oral reading passage administration. Prior to the reading, children were encouraged to scan each passage for "any help" that they would like to receive before reading. Again, the only condition placed on their requests for help was that they could not ask, "What is that word?" A range of prompts was used to provide assistance for difficult words (e.g. placing word in a strategic context; progressively

exposing a polysyllabic word from left to right syllable by syllable; providing analogues to difficult parts of words; suggesting meanings for potentially difficult words; moving backward or forward in text for clues to meaning).

Context six comprised the reading of another set of passages. The scenario included a brief discussion about the topic, focussing on prior knowledge rather than on content from the passage, and culminating in establishing a purpose for reading. This was followed by an opportunity to scan for potential problems and to enlist assistance.

Sessions for contexts four to six were conducted on three consecutive days; again, contexts were assigned randomly for each day's session. All sessions were taped. Further, after each session, the classroom teacher conducted a brief, very informal, conference with the children to gain insights into their perceptions of the session.

Responses to the word list and passage reading were analyzed to determine maximum instructional levels for each child. Transcripts of tapes were analyzed. Descriptive analyses only were done.

RESULTS

Contexts One to Three

The responses to the word list assessment within the three contexts are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Highest Instructional Word Reading Level Achieved
Within Assessment Contexts

Contexts	Highest Instructional Level							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Context #1		1	1	4	1	1		
Context #2		1	1		2	2	2	
Context #3		1	1			2	2	1

Intuition would suggest that increased time and increased input would result in commensurate improvements in student performance. This was, indeed, so with six of the eight children in the study. It did not, however, apply to two of the children. These children remained within the level two to three instructional range irrespective of context. In context two, one of these children checked off a total of three words (across three word lists) as correct when, in fact, these words had been read incorrectly. He failed to identify two words as having been read correctly. Another child failed to check two incorrect words as correct and failed to identify four words as having been read correctly. These were the two children with the lowest instructional level across the three contexts. One of these children was unable to think of a single question to ask; the other asked two questions which failed to result in successful

responses. The prompts in context three produced one additional correct response for only one of these children (about was read correctly when the word was successively exposed).

For six of the children in the study, freedom to ask questions, and particularly, the occasion to receive prompts increased the range of performance markedly. One child moved from instructionals level four to five to seven across the three contexts respectively.

Contexts Four to Six

The results of the assessment of word passage reading are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Highest Instructional Passage Reading Level Achieved Within Assessment Contexts

Contexts	Highest Instructional Level							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Context #4 (N=8)		3	3	2				
Context #5 (N=8)		1	1	2	3	1		
Context #6 (N=8)		1	1	1	2	3		

Again, the range of instructional levels increased as the context allowed for increased prompting and interaction, that is for all but two

children, who as in contexts one to three showed relatively stable performance across contexts. It became readily apparent that children varied widely in their abilities to scan for potential problems. Further, the range of questions varied widely across the sample. Three children in the sample gave no evidence of knowledge of context as a source for help.

A number of insights came from comments of the children. For example, one child who moved across levels three, five and six (in contexts four to six) made the following comment relative to context six:

Child: Now that we have talked about the story, I know which words to look at.

Investigator: How's that?

Child: Well, I know a lot about camping anyway and this makes it easy to see words that are hard (thinks for a while)... but most of the words are not hard when you know something about the story ... and you have done it (camping) before.

Another child who moved across levels four, five, and six, made the following comment relative to context five:

Child: It's easy to find the words I can't do.

Investigator: How do you do this?

Child: Well, I just go down the page and say, "Which words can't I read?" I just don't know what kinds of questions are right.

Investigator: Try this one. Ask me a question about this (pointing to <u>through</u> which the child has identified as hard for him).

Child: You can't say the <u>gh</u>. Right?

Investigator: Right! Any other questions?

Child: I guess I should ask if reading farther will be a good idea.

Investigator: I think that is a good question.

Child: (Thinks) I guess good readers aren't only good readers. I guess they have to ask questions that fit... Maybe then I don't always have to ask you ... or like a teacher.

These types of comments from children provide evidence that children as they interact within the assessment context with another person not only act directly on prompts, but also interact with themselves as they make new discoveries about reading and especially their own reading. This corroborates a statement made by Brown and Reeve (1985) claiming that "bandwidths of competence" are created by contexts which vary in their degree of support. These contexts can be overtly social or covertly social as in the case of responding to an imagined internalized audience.

Another observation made during the sessions was that the slightest suspicion that "real" testing was occurring changed the behavior, more dramatically in some instances than in others. Karen's sudden shift in behaviour illustrates the point.

Karen was reading with the investigator in a session she assumed to be instructional. She read, not exactly fluently, but with obvious meaning reflected in her voice, by the number and quality of self corrections, and in the way in which she organized her oral production in relatively meaningful language clusters. When she noticed the investigator poising his pen to record comments on her performance, she interrupted her reading with "Oh, I didn't know this was a test." Immediately, her voice reflected strain, and her reading became labored and fragmented. Her word accuracy necessitated fewer corrections. However, the corrections she made were meaningless. (See appendix for protocol). There was an immediate change in Karen's sense of language marked by a decrease in the number of words clustered in her reading. Further, two of the few instances in which she clustered more than one word, she did so across sentence boundaries (see lines 10 and 13).

Karen was asked to listen to her taped reading. The transcript which follows documents her perception about appropriate instructional context behaviour and appropriate testing context behavior.

K: I changed my reading in line 8.

I: How did you change it?

K: I stopped being sloppy. I read real careful.

I: Were you not careful in the first part?

K: Not really. I read fast and I went back.

I: Why did you stop doing that in line 8?

K: Because I didn't know it was a test. And I just tried hard.

I: Do you try harder on tests then when you do other reading?

K: Yes!

I: Why?

K: Teachers (and...like you...) put things in our report and my mom wants me to try the best.

I: When we started reading, why did you think that this was not a test?

K: Well...like, we talked about it...to help me. And then I asked you questions.

I: And then it's not a test?

K: No. (without hesitation) We just talked -- and I just said what I thought in my reading. I wasn't really thinking hard. Also, you helped me.

Karen's test taking register and her learning register are clearly differentiated. Further, like many children, she appears quite satisfied with this situation. Her test taking register applies even to something as informal as an IRI. Under such circumstances, how can we determine the instructional conditions under which Karen can best progress and the

conditions under which her ability to learn can be altered. If the goal in assessment is to determine the minimal instructional adjustment necessary to succeed, then Karen's test taking register represents a major obstacle to the realization of such a goal.

Teacher Interview Responses

The teacher interviews were very brief and meant to be as spontaneous and informal as possible. Inspite of the brevity, they yielded some interesting insights into children's perception of appropriate test taking register -- both on their part and on the part of the examiner.

Clearly, contexts one and four were viewed as tests, and clearly the results of these "tests" would be passed on to the teacher, and from him to the parents, and as one child put it "then to other places". Consistently, the children were unable to think of what would happen to the results of their performance in context two, three, five and six. When asked about their perceptions of the purpose of these sessions only two children responded. One of them questioningly replied, "maybe he wants to find out about kids." Another responded, "perhaps he likes to teach children and takes us out to help us."

None of the eight children was able to verbalize why contexts one and four represented test situations. When the teacher asked how they knew, the typical response was a shrug of the shoulder and "I just know." Every child was able to provide reasons why context two, three, five and six were not tests. The most common reason was that the investigator had helped them and that they could ask any questions they wished. One child responded "he gave me answers" when this, of course, was not the case at all.

When asked how well they had done (context one) six of the eight thought they had done well, one thought she had done "ok", and one "wasn't sure." In response to the same question for contexts two and three, there wasn't one child who thought she/he had done well. The responses varied from "ok, maybe" to "terrible." Responses to their perceptions of their performance in contexts four to six was more variable. As compared with context one (no assistance), only three thought they had done well in context four (no assistance), two thought they had done quite well, and three thought they had performed poorly.

All children perceived themselves to have performed poorly in contexts five and six. None of them were able to provide reasons except for three children in context five and two in context six who perceived themselves as having needed too much help.

DISCUSSION

Generally, the aim in assessment is to determine the minimal instructional adjustments necessary to succeed with a particular type of text. A search for such minimal adjustments requires that the examiner look for "peaks of performance", frequently considered to be aberrations and ignored during testing. Feuerstein (1979) feels that:

> these peaks of performance must be viewed as very important hints of the existence of a capacity that does not become generally manifest because of the individual's inefficiency in using it. The inefficiency may be transient or more permanent for reasons that have to be revealed by appropriate search (p. 34).

Clearly, for most of the children in this study, termination of the testing cycle at conventional levels would have failed to reveal their peaks (some of them quite dramatic) of performance. Failure to recognize

these peaks has serious implications for intervention plans. It would follow that interventions based on traditional assessment criteria would likely leave six of the eight children in the sample for this study with instructional programs considerably below their levels of potential performance.

The real significance of such "searches for peaks" goes far beyond a simple identification of levels at which children can perform. The essence lies in the identification of factors which either facilitate or inhibit learning. In other words, such a search specifies the conditions under which progress can be made and the conditions under which the ability to learn can be altered (Cioffi & Carney, 1983). What is noteworthy is the fact that a dynamic context has the potential to extend the range of insights under which learning can or will not occur. It provides insights into strategies which children possess under given conditions. It is significant that two of the children in this study experienced difficulty in identifying words they had read correctly earlier. It is also significant that children varied in their abilities to anticipate difficulties as they scanned textual materials. Equally significant was the variability among children in the range of questions they were able to pose for the investigator -- some no questions at all, others a wide range of questions highly pertinent to particular text reading problems. An assessment context which invites the examinee to expose process knowledge of this nature has implications for instruction which can lead to the development of "self improvement strategies rather than to the accumulation of learned items" (Clay, 1985). In this sense, this study points to potential pitfalls of single assessments which rely on "static snapshot

descriptions of developmental status frozen in time and welded to particular task environments" (Brown & Reeve, 1985, p. 71).

The children in this study, then, manifested varying "zones" or "bandwidths of competence" under conditions assumed to be "supportive," and conditions which involved considerable interaction. These conditions did, indeed, lead to the "evaluation of cognitive processes" and permitted the investigators to see growth and change as opposed to "fossilized" or automated processes of static states of cognition. For Vygotsky, it was necessary to "alter the automatic, mechanized, fossilized character of the higher forms of behaviour and turn it back to its source through experiment to permit dynamic analyses (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 64). In other words, it was important to create environments in which cognitive processes underwent "change right before one's eyes."

Vygotsky's view held that "learning should be matched in some manner with the child's developmental level" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 85). However, he maintained that it is impossible to understand a child's developmental level without considering two aspects of that level, i.e., the actual developmental level and the potential developmental level. The actual developmental level is the result of "already completed developmental cycles." Typically, standardized tests, and measures such as informal reading inventories are designed to reflect a reasonable estimate of the child's actual developmental level.

An interactive environment involving "demonstrations" and "leading questions" provides the child with the necessary support to demonstrate his/her potential developmental level. It was Vygotsky's belief that the repertoire of behaviors manifested within the "zone of proximal

development" (the zone marking the boundaries of competence between the two developmental levels) would in time become the learner's independent repertoire.

There are a number of ways in which Vygotsky's zone theory can be brought to an interpretation of the variant zone widths exhibited by children in this study. Indeed, considerable "zones" were evident in the case of six children. What about the apparently limited "zones" of two of the children, both in the word reading and passage reading tasks? One interpretation might be that these children, in fact, have limited "zones" at this point in time. That is, there is virtually no difference between their actual developmental level and their potential level. If this is found to be so, that is important information for the teacher to obtain.

Another interpretation begs the question, not of the existence of actual "zones" (or the width of these zones), but rather whether or not the assessment environments in the study provided the kind of support, demonstrations, and prompts necessary for these children to reveal their "bandwidths of competence." Stierer (1983) emphasizes that, in fact, assessment in a very real sense is a test of the tester:

> Coming to know the reader is, after all, a case of making meaning within a complex social context. Just as for research and reading, a sociolinguistic emphasis makes explicit two vital aspects of reading assessment. First, it reinforces the sense-making nature of assessment, in contrast with the widely-held belief that it is an unambiguous mechanical operation. Second, it locates the assessment process within a situation which comprises a complex network of social structures and relationships (Stierer, 1983, p. 81).

Any dynamic assessment situation, then, stretches the competencies of the examiner to the limit. The most one can expect is for the examiner to provide the supportive environment which enables the development of a picture of many possible manifestations of reading, including

manifestations which may well be contradictory in nature. Wertsch (1979) states, that "The issue is not simply one of whether or not the adult is providing strategic assistance -- it is also an issue of what type of other regulation is being used (p. 19). Johnston (1986) puts in bluntly, "it would involve considering the teacher as the instrument to be developed rather than the task" (p. 86). Clearly, the teacher/examiner engages in a process of meaning making as she/he, in turn, probes and observes the meaning making manifestations of the learner, in sharp contrast with the widely-held belief that assessment is an unambiguous mechanical operation.

This study highlights the range of perceptions of children of assessment constraints as well as a range of notions of perceived consequences of assessments. It is clear that children (at least those in this study) regard the testing situation as something totally different from any other context they are likely to encounter. It would appear from studies such as this that the assessment setting must be viewed as the stage for real language encounters. And there are significant differences between natural language encounters and "invitations" to use language in typical assessment situations.

In the first instance, the agenda in a typical testing situation is controlled by one of the persons, and a significant part of that agenda is secret. In fact, the rules of testing generally specify that the agenda must remain secret. In a natural language encounter each party is expected to contribute to the agenda; indeed, it is normally in the best interests of both parties to call for clarification if the agenda is unclear. Further, in natural discourse it is expected that the agenda may undergo at least some modification by mutual consent. Most testing situations make no provision for such modification.

Freedom of modification suggests freedom to explore and to risk temporary disagreement. The usual testing situation does not invite exploration and generally penalizes risk-taking (or at least is assumed to operate in that way by the person being tested.) Much of natural discourse invites pushing the limits of the imagination and intelligence. The language in most testing situations pushes persons to correct answers, especially answers assumed to be correct by other people. Finally, much of natural discourse happens without particular thought given to the consequences of what is being said. Or at the very least parties in conversation have a reasonable notion as to possible consequences. In the testing situation the person being tested seldom knows the consequences of the testing, and in many instances imagines the worst. This state of affairs is often exacerbated by the fact that much testing takes place between near or complete strangers, a circumstance which contributes significantly to the artificiality and limitations placed on the exercise of natural language functions.

In summary, this study provides additional support for dynamic assessment contexts which invite children (and adults) to use language in more natural ways than has been possible in traditional testing situations. It underlines the need for examiners/teachers to help children "negotiate" the zone of proximal development, gradually "luring them further and further into the task until, ultimately, the transition to self-regulation is complete" (Teale, 1981, p. 909).

APPENDIX

The first days of the steam trains
were exciting and dangerous. The trains
looked like big monsters. They threw off
sparks and smoke, ran off the track, and
sometimes they even blew up. But everyone
wanted to ride these fast new steam trains.
Soon trains joined the big cities in the east.
Work teams blasted their way through the
mountains laying tracks from the east
coast to the west. New towns sprung up in
places that were once prairie. When the
track was finished, people rode trains from
one end of the country to the other Trains
helped our country grow.

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